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# TODAY AND TOMORROW IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

Remarks of D. F. Houston, Secretary of Agriculture,  
before the Association of American Agricultural  
Colleges and Experiment Stations, at  
Baltimore, Md., January 8, 1919



WASHINGTON, D. C., JANUARY 10, 1919

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I GREET YOU under happier circumstances than those which prevailed at the time of your last meeting. Then our spirits were burdened and our minds strained because of the magnitude of the world tragedy and of our part of the task of aiding the Nation to vindicate its rights and to preserve its freedom. We were grievously laden, but we were not dismayed. We were grimly serious and confident of an ultimate favorable issue. I remember asserting at that time that the struggle was one which called not only for enormous resources but also for an invincible determination, and that it was a test of the spirit even more than of physical strength. I ventured the statement that we had physical resources in larger measure than any other country; that we ourselves did not fully realize the great power of the Nation; and that there could be no doubt of a final favorable outcome if our spirit was right and our purpose steadfast, or if the descendants of the soldiers of '61 were worthy of them. How fine the spirit and how worthy the sons the world well knows.

Not the sons alone, but also the fathers and mothers and the sisters and brothers; for the whole Nation was essentially a unit—more united than at any previous time in its history. The people were not simply waiting to be led, but in every section were alert to do the necessary thing, revealing the power of democracy in war as it had in peace. Not alone did the boys who fought at Chateau Thierry and the Argonne Forest have the spirit of crusaders. It was manifest also among those who stayed at home and did their duty, among the men and women of the city and the village, in the shop, on the range, and on the farm. Who of you, because of the things he witnessed, has not a deeper pride in calling himself an American citizen?

There are those who were surprised at the spirit and power of this Nation; and, among them, the most astounded, doubtless, was the enemy. The Germans themselves made many mistakes during the



course of the war, but none so great or fateful as that of imagining that anything their submarines could do to the Allies would be appreciable in comparison with what this Nation, cooperating with the Allies, would do to them, if it entered the war.

#### DISABILITIES UNDER WHICH EUROPE NOW LABORS.

Now, the great struggle had been won by the forces of civilization, and this Nation is free—at least temporarily free—to take up once more the tasks of peace. It has issued from the contest, comparatively speaking, untouched and unhampered. By reason of its shorter actual participation in the war and its freedom from such devastation as has swept Europe, its relative position, industrially, financially, socially, and governmentally, is stronger than it was five years ago. The world does not yet realize how stricken are the European countries and how long it will take them to recover and to make their former material contribution to the world's stock.

It is impossible yet for one to frame in his mind a complete picture of the disabilities under which all Europe labors. It has been estimated that the European belligerents, exclusive of the Balkan States and Turkey, lost more than seven millions of men killed and fourteen millions wounded, many of them permanently incapacitated, a total casualty list of over twenty millions. The impairment resulting from these losses and the burden imposed by great numbers of widows and orphans cannot be calculated. And what of the destruction of property, the enormous losses of merchant ships, the disruption of industry?

We must think, too, of the immense upheaval in the social, economic, and political field, of the years of struggle that will ensue before governments are reorganized and orderly political processes are restored. In Central Europe the old regime will not reappear. For the first time in their lives the masses of the people will have an opportunity to say something about their future and to take part in the direction of the government. They will not be content with the restoration of former conditions and will demand things in the way of political participation, of standards of living, and of wages that will constitute a revolution.

#### OUR BURDEN LIGHT COMPARED WITH THAT OF EUROPE.

Obviously, also, account must be taken of the enormous debts, the principal of which must be ultimately discharged and the interest paid. It is probable that the war debt of all the belligerents will range from \$175,000,000,000 to \$200,000,000,000. It is estimated that that of Great Britain will exceed 32 billions, 37 per cent of her estimated real wealth, and \$700 per capita; that of France, more



than 25 billions, 50 per cent of her wealth, and \$600 per capita; that of Germany, 33 billions, 40 per cent of her wealth, and \$560 per capita; that of Austria 18 billions, 76 per cent of her wealth, and \$346 per capita; that of Italy 7 billions, 30 per cent of her wealth, and \$200 per capita; while that of the United States may be 20 billions, only 11 per cent of her wealth, and \$200 per capita.

And yet there are those who express alarm as to the future ability of this country to hold its due place in the trade of the world. There are doubtless others who may take smug satisfaction in the thought that Europe will be relatively handicapped. Many among us still entertain medieval notions of trade, and foolishly think that one nation can gain only at the expense of another, or that it is possible for a nation to secure what it needs from others without giving an adequate return. It is incredible that any thinking man can gain satisfaction from an impairment of the capacity of any part of the world to contribute to the world's national dividend of goods and services.

Our thought, it seems to me, should be how, in the period of recovery, we may properly assist the desperately stricken people of Europe rather than of how we can take advantage of them in their present plight.

#### CONCERT OF CIVILIZED NATIONS NOW IN VIEW.

I said that this Nation is temporarily free. It is temporarily free from menace from Germany or any other power, but it is in certain respects more handicapped than it was before the war. It is handicapped at present by suspension of many of its normal, helpful activities, and by a burden of debt which must be discharged. The full resumption and extension of useful activities and the discharge of its obligations will be retarded if the world must continue to live under the old rule of national self-seeking, under the sway of an aggressive spirit inspired by foolish national pride and national ambition to dominate additional territory, and under the threat of competitive militarism and, worse, of the militarists.

With all the joy we experience over the downfall of German autocracy, shall we not be greatly depressed and regard our sacrifices as only partly compensated for, if it shall appear that there is not enough enlightenment and unselfishness in the world to permit a concert of civilized nations to prevent a recurrence of such a world tragedy? I know of no other way of securing an effective expression of the common will and purpose of civilized nations in international law and of giving it the requisite sanction than through some sort of league of nations. Nations have been drawn very closely together in a generation and it is an imperative necessity that their common

will shall find expression and that their purposes shall be executed. No one can fail to recognize the difficulties of the task; but the difficulty of a task to a people who are worth while is only an incentive to endeavor. To me it does not seem at all beyond the bounds of reason that today the will of nations in essential world matters can find expression and sanction and that national desperadoes can be kept in their place by right thinking people.

Doubtless no one of the framers of our Constitution would have thought it possible to have a workable Government reaching into the most intimate details of life of a hundred millions of people inhabiting half a continent. The difficulties of effecting a concert of powers and of securing the requisite action seem to me inconsiderable in comparison with the difficulties of any alternative condition. Any alternative implies a continuance of hostile, competitive national action in many directions, and especially of armament, and such expense of armament as the world before the European war scarcely dreamed of. How any of the belligerents can meet existing financial demands, bear the burden of militarism under conditions of the future, and make progress, I am unable to see. Certainly they would be foolish to permit the continuance of conditions which would necessitate such burdens.

A league of nations seems to me to be prerequisite to four things: to disarmament in the necessary degree, to the interchange of commodities among nations under rational and equitable conditions, to the freedom of the seas, and to the development of the proper attitude and practice in reference to the backward territories of the world. I shall pray that this may come, but if it does not, I shall not despair; for I know that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the world is improving. History teaches optimism and reveals that by slow prudence, through soft degree, a rugged people is being subdued to the useful and the good.

#### FURTHER CONSTRUCTION, RATHER THAN RECONSTRUCTION, THE AIM IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE.

We especially, representing great agencies of the State and Federal Governments, will proceed with our assigned tasks, and unless I am greatly mistaken, they will not be tasks of reconstruction, but rather of further construction, of selection, and emphasis. I am confident that the agriculture of the Nation is on substantially sound foundations and is developing in the right direction. Many experienced and disciplined minds and agencies in all parts of the country have zealously been studying the problems for many years, with increasing effectiveness during the last generation, and it would surprise me if

it should appear that many novel steps of large proportion will need to be taken.

Much has been accomplished. The great agricultural colleges of the Nation and the Federal Department have been steadily developed and are pursuing research and conducting educational work of high value to the Nation. The future seems to hold the promise of a further perfection of organization through a plan for organizing greater State Departments of Agriculture along administrative and regulatory lines with which the colleges and the Federal Department may more fruitfully cooperate. We have witnessed in recent years much helpful legislation, such as the Smith-Lever and Federal Aid Road Acts, the Grain Standards and the Cotton Futures laws, the establishment of the Federal Reserve and the Farm Loan Systems, and the creation of Federal and State agencies to assist farmers in the marketing of their products.

Much remains to be done in the field of agriculture. This fundamental part of the Nation's industrial life will not stand still. Constructive action must, of necessity, continue, and there will be need of very clear and unbiased thinking. In this, as in all times of great change and movement, there is no little confusion and no little apprehension and misapprehension. We shall have our troubles. We shall be confronted with numerous proposals from the enthusiast with limited knowledge and less sense of direction. We shall be pestered by the narrow, selfish partisan and by the demagogues, the farmers of the farmers, their pretended self-constituted friends. These are already in evidence and are revealing for ends of their own a willingness to attempt by misrepresentations and cheap appeals to prejudice to injure great constructive agencies, such as the State agricultural colleges and the Federal Department. They will not make much headway. The American farmers are not easily fooled and we may trust them to assess these people and their motives at their real worth.

#### ASSISTANCE FOR BEGINNERS IN FARMING.

We shall lend every possible assistance to returning soldiers and others who may wish to begin life anew in the difficult business of farming. In truth, a very special duty will devolve upon agricultural establishments to see that the most effective aid is rendered to such beginners. Farming is a difficult business; and it will be no kindness to any man without knowledge and experience to encourage him to enter it. We shall give our support to any well-considered plans to promote more orderly land settlement. Of course, there is room for more farmers in this country, but only for as many as are necessary



to produce a volume of products which the public will take at remunerative prices. Farming must pay, and only as it pays will people enter it or remain in it. This is a truth often lost sight of, especially by urban peoples, and it is time for them to be enlightened. Poor farming, of course, will not pay. And our responsibility in this direction is to omit nothing to improve processes and to remove burdens imposed by waste, by animal disease, and by unsatisfactory marketing conditions.

#### PERSONAL CREDIT UNIONS.

Particularly must we seek to hasten the process from tenancy to ownership. This we can further through promotion of good farming and the improvement of rural finance. One further step in the latter direction remains to be taken, and that is the establishment of State systems of personal credit unions. This implies the difficult thing of cooperation, and in its fuller realization our agencies can be peculiarly helpful.

#### IMMEDIATE RESUMPTION OF HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION.

Both because of the high value of improved highways to the industrial and agricultural life of the Nation, road construction, under the Federal Aid Road Act especially, should be resumed promptly in full measure, and additional Federal funds should be made available to supplement State funds and to be expended in cooperation with State Commissions. We have the duty also confronting us of restoring confidence on the part of the live stock producers of the Nation in the machinery of live stock and meat distribution, through proper regulation of the stock yards and packing houses; and especially must we take steps to reduce the economic waste resulting from disease and the lack of adequate medical facilities among the masses of our rural population. Legislation covering these matters is already under consideration and I take the liberty of commending it to your earnest thought and consideration.

#### CONTINUANCE OF ENLARGED EXTENSION FORCES.

During the war both Federal and State Agricultural agencies have directed their thought and energies emphatically to tasks of fundamental importance to the winning of the war. In particular, they omitted nothing to secure an increase of production along economic lines. In cooperation, under additional Federal and State funds, they promptly took steps to enlarge the extension forces. This piece of educational machinery furnished under trying circumstances an additional proof of its value for many purposes. It commended itself to

many more thoughtful farmers throughout the Nation, as revealed by their effective cooperation through the provision of local funds. It is of great importance that this machinery shall not be impaired; and I have recommended to the Congress not only that the future annual increments of the Smith-Lever funds be anticipated, but also that such other appropriations be made as will, with additional State and local contributions, permit the continuance of the existing forces at least approximately at their present strength. I am convinced also by our experience during the war that we should continue our agencies for assisting the farmers to secure labor and the enlarged market news services of the Bureau of Markets, which in marked measure have demonstrated their value.

#### AN EFFECTIVE OFFICE OF FARM MANAGEMENT.

There is another important matter of common interest. For many years I have been deeply interested in farm management, a vital part of the economics of agriculture. I am by no means satisfied with our present plan and especially with that part of the work of the Office of Farm Management relating to studies of costs of farm crops. The Office has done valuable work in a number of directions. But some of the studies of farm costs, especially those made during the war, were unsatisfactory in method and were highly inadequate in point of interpretation and presentation. I need not enlarge on the difficulty of securing real costs, especially of the staple products produced by millions of people over half a continent under systems of mixed farming. I realize that we can not secure precise cost figures for each unit produced. Averages which will serve as guides are the best we can hope for; but we can at least insist that efforts be made to secure actual reliable data on representative farms and that these be satisfactorily interpreted. Nothing but the facts will help the farmers or any other class in the Nation. Impressionistic studies are highly likely to be misleading.

I have already had the situation canvassed by able and impartial committees. I am now invoking the assistance of a number of experts. I shall invite the help of the best and most experienced minds in your body and shall hope at the proper time to lay before the Congress a carefully considered scheme for an effective Office of Farm Management. I shall hope that full contacts may be established between this Office and similar offices in the agricultural colleges, so that in due time we may be able to give more competent advice to the farmers of the Nation in the field of agricultural economics and we may not again be caught without reliable data as a basis for thinking and acting.

## PROSPECTS AS TO PRICES.

The food situation needs little comment before members of this body. The year 1917 witnessed a marked increase of farm products over the average in all the leading staples except cotton and wheat. That record, except for corn and cotton, was maintained or exceeded in 1918, especially in respect to wheat. The Nation, therefore, has a supply of farm products sufficient for its own needs and can spare large quantities for the stricken peoples of Europe. The indications are that prices for available supplies will remain at a high level and be remunerative to producers.

What the world situation will be at the end of the next harvest and what suggestions should be made for the ensuing planting season are matters of much doubt. We know that the farmers greatly extended their planted acreage during the war. In 1917 they planted, in leading cereals, potatoes, tobacco, and cotton, 22,000,000 acres more than in the year preceding our entry into the war and 35,000,000 more than the five-year pre-war average. This they increased in 1918 by 5,600,000. The wheat acreage in 1917 exceeded the average for 1910-14 by 7,000,000. This was extended in 1918 by 3,500,000; and had it not been for unfavorable weather conditions the Nation might have experienced some embarrassment in effectuating its price guarantee for the current crop. As you are aware, the farmers last fall bettered their wheat planting record by approximately 7,000,000 acres and the crop entered the winter in better condition than for many years. There is prospect of a large planting in the spring. The indications, therefore, are that the Nation will be called upon through appropriations to make up the difference between the future market price and that guaranteed by the Government. The Nation must, of course, make good its guarantee; and the problem has been presented to the Congress for consideration and appropriate action.

You are aware also that there was a generous increase in the production of the leading classes of live stock. This is true especially of hogs, and the Food Administration is experiencing difficulty in maintaining the agreement in regard to their price. One thing seems clear, and that is that the nations of Europe will omit nothing to increase the production of food products in respect to which they can secure results within the year. Shipping is opening up and the remote sources of supply will once more become available. What the price situation will be at the end of the next harvest season I am not able to forecast; and, of course, one would assume a grave responsibility in urging marked increases of production in the absence of certainty and in view of the hazards which farmers might run. In the light of all the circumstances, it seems that our general policy



should be to present all available information from time to time to the farmers of the Nation for their guidance and to advise the adoption of sound agricultural practice.

#### PATRIOTIC DEVOTION TO TASKS OF PEACE.

In the future, as in the past, particularly in the world crisis, I shall continue to look to you for advice and assistance and to cooperate with you. I can not sufficiently express my gratitude for your support during the recent critical days. You responded generously to every call and unhesitatingly placed yourselves and your institutions at the service of the Government. We are now free to resume the important tasks of peace. Shall we not approach them with the same fine spirit of patriotic devotion and unity of purpose we gave to those of war? The Nation has a right to expect this, and the sacrifices of our people, and especially of our boys, demand it.





